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Statement submitted by International Council of Women, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

The International Council of Women, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, has been committed to advancing women's equal rights and empowerment since its establishment in 1888. We firmly believe that the attainment of gender equality and the empowerment of women are indispensable keys to facilitating progress toward sustainable development for the world.

The International Council of Women welcomes the focus of the sixty-third United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. It is important to consider the contribution that social protection can make in improving access to public services and to creation and maintenance of sustainable infrastructure. It is also important to recognize the positive impact of gender equality, of the empowerment of women and girls and of sustainable development throughout the world. Furthermore, optimal design and equal access are critical to the role of social protection as an economic and social stabilizer, in light of significant economic disruptions stemming from the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Social protection policy is increasingly used by countries as a strategy to reduce inequality and poverty. Common forms of social protection include social insurance, social assistance and labour market interventions. As women and girls are often among the main victims of established discrimination, social protection deserves the focused attention of the International Council of Women.

Clearly, deep-rooted gender inequalities remain in all societies. Social discrimination, harmful customs and traditions, as well as dominant business practices work counter to the implementation of genuine equal rights. Women continue to suffer from gender-based violence, lack of decent work opportunities, occupational segregation and unequal pay. In far too many instances, women are denied access to basic education and health care. Women and girls are under-represented in political and economic decision-making processes, while forming the brunt of those living in poverty and seriously lacking access to social protection.

Support for the equal right of women to various forms of social protection has been central to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Gender equality and women's empowerment are critical to the achievement of all seventeen Sustainable Development Goals. Therefore, social protection systems, public services and infrastructure must embrace the achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment as key goals and objectives.

Social protection policies and programs are key instruments for achieving economic and social development. They can take the forms of income redistribution mechanisms, cash transfers, and behavioural incentives that facilitate labour market adjustments, reduce poverty and create sustainable development. As a matter of fact, there are a host of problems associated with effective enactment of these policies and programs. In many countries, forms of social protection, which encompasses contributory and non-contributory social insurance benefits, social assistance and labour market programs, are provided only to those employed in formal labour markets. This excludes women, who are unemployed, who work in small enterprises and who work in the informal sector, from access to protection. Furthermore, the design of many social protection programs reinforces patriarchal family structures and gender stereotypes of women, which exacerbates gender inequalities.

Hence, the International Council of Women urges all governments to design and implement gender-sensitive social protection programs that are equally accessible by women, that provide equity in labour market treatment, and that overcome traditional gender roles. Only by ensuring these features will social protection programs act to promote the achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment. To eliminate the barriers to equal access of women to social protection, informal workers and women who do not work in the labour markets should be included within the scope and under the umbrella of social protection programs. Public care services ought to be considered in communities to alleviate the burden of care and domestic work undertaken almost exclusively by women and girls. This has been a major barrier to women entering and staying in the job market.

To achieve the greatest benefit, social protection should include gender-sensitive cash transfers and pension programs that are specifically targeted at women. It is recognized that cash transfers put directly in women's hands are almost always used for the benefit of the entire household. This form of transfer leads to improved bargaining power for women in the household, to better nutrition and health for family members and to enhanced education for all children, especially girls. To encourage better education and to promote good health for children, cash transfers ought to be tied to the children's school attendance and visits to health facilities. Long-term benefits of well-designed cash transfers can result in enhanced women's empowerment, reduction of poverty and a healthier and better-educated society.

Looking from a different perspective, with advances in medical technology, people are living longer, and women generally live longer than men. Elderly women continue to have unpaid care and domestic burdens and also face the possibility of living in poverty in old age. Social protection should include the extension of largely unconditional cash transfer programs and social pensions for older citizens. This would help to counteract the lack of social protection for the large number of older women who have been previously employed in informal markets or have engaged in unpaid work. Furthermore, it has been found that cash transfers to elderly women often act as a form of education subsidy for grandchildren and thereby improving education for the community as a whole.

The International Council of Women urges governments to provide funding for data collection and budgetary analysis to assess the underlying causes of women's exclusion from social protection programs. Only then can effective programs be formulated and implemented. The International Council of Women also urges collaboration among all sectors of society to determine the best designs for initiatives to address the underlying causes for exclusion of women from social protection. These measures in themselves can act to help promote women's empowerment and gender equality.

It is also imperative that women have a voice in the design, planning, implementation and evaluation stages of social protection initiatives. This is necessary to ensure the inclusion of meaningful gender-sensitive dimensions that address women's access to social protection and promotes gender equality and women's empowerment. Such involvement and influence will likely come about only with women's active participation in social and political leadership.

Social protection is instrumental to reducing poverty and addressing the inequalities faced by women, especially the most vulnerable rural, migrant, disabled, elderly and poor women. The International Council of Women remains steadfast in its commitment to the stated goal of the United Nations in The Agenda for Sustainable Development to end poverty in all its forms and to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.